

EPISODE 139: BOOKLAB 3 – WITH GRETCHEN S.B.

Speaker 1: Two writers. One just starting out, the other a best seller. Join James Blatch and Mark Dawson and their amazing guests as they discuss how you can make a living telling stories. There's never been a better time to be a writer.

James Blatch: Hello and welcome to the Self Publishing Formula Podcast with James and Mark, and it is that time of the year where we do another book lab. We don our white coats, we enter the laboratory of books. This is one of the best ideas I had for the podcast and we've done it.

Mark Dawson: Bollocks.

James Blatch: This will be the third time. It may have been your idea. This is going to go into dispute in the future. This is the third book lab and you chose the book.

Tell me your thinking behind the book.

Mark Dawson: I just wanted something a bit different. We've done thrillers, romances and we're going to do something a little bit different this time.

Actually, before we do that, I think we should probably mention the fact that, if I'm correct when we're recording this, the 101 course will just about still be open. Is that right?

James Blatch: This is going to be on the 28th of September, yeah, so that's about right. Yes, just.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, so literally for a few days, so if you're interested in signing up for 101, which we won't offer again until next year, then you

should go to selfpublishingformula.com/101 and all the details will be on the registration page there.

James Blatch: Good shout. Okay, and if you're listening to this after the next couple of days when it's closed, you can sign up to a waiting list then, be first to her when it does open.

We are going to go into the lab then, so we've quite a lot to get through in this episode so we're going to press on with it.

The book that Mark chose is called, *Lady of the Dead*, and it's by Gretchen S.B. It is a paranormal romance and we, as usual, we gave it to a cover expert, we gave it to a blurb expert, we gave it to an editor, and the editor looks at the look inside. The interviews are great, they're very valuable.

Let's start with the cover, with our friend Stuart Bache, who is an expert cover designer with a keen eye on what works and what doesn't, see what his take on it was.

Now if you want to follow this a long, try and make sure if you're watching on YouTube you can see the cover whilst we're talking, but there is a PDF to download and on that PDF you will get the cover as it is at the moment, you'll get the before and after blurbs, so you'll see what Bryan's done with it.

And you'll also get a really useful, I'm not going to spoil it, but a really useful bit of feedback from the editor, from Jenny Nash, which is going to be I think a blog post as well because it was such a value piece of writing from her.

Let's start with Stuart and find out what he thought about the cover.

We're covering the genres, we're ripping through them and this is Gretchen S.B. and the book is called, *Lady of the Dead*, and you can see the cover. If you're watching on YouTube the cover will be in vision on the screen throughout this as we talk about it.

Stuart, with your expert cover designer eye, give us the verdict.

Stuart Bache: For the most part, it's pretty good. It ticks many, many of the boxes.

Obviously it's paranormal romance, which has some sort of similarities to urban fantasy and things like that in terms of visual or the covers that like ... Aesthetics.

I think the pros are the series logo's really nice. It's a bit different from how you'd usually have series logos, so it's really putting it out there, emphasizing it. I think it probably could stand out a little bit more, it sort of fades into background, but I'll go into that a bit later.

The title typeface is good, it's sort of that nice swishy thing with the As and the Ls and the Ys, that's really nice and fits within the genre too.

I think the figure's good. I have seen her used before. That's the problem with Shutterstock and places like that, but it really works with the genre once again.

My initial feeling when I first looked at the cover was that it works. That's fine, however from a design perspective, this is a critique, the composition is a bit weak.

At the moment the character takes up a huge amount of space and the title and the author name are forced to the bottom. In my eye that's how it looks, so when I look at things I always try and feel how everything can work together.

Obviously, we think about certain genres, you want the title to be emphasized or the author to be emphasized, but even with that everything has to work together. Just because you want to emphasize one aspect doesn't mean other things should be just moved off to the side or squeezed in.

A way to tighten that up would be, well personally I wouldn't move anything of the image, but I would bring the title up in size. Take it as is, stretch it out a little bit more so the L of Lady is a bit closer to left edge and the D of Dead, the last D, would be equal onto the right edge, and then shift it up so that say the Y, or the D and the Y of lady are resting on her shoulder.

You're making a bit more of it and you're moving it up a little bit and it interacts a little bit better. That's just personal choice, but I think it would work much better, and by doing that you could then have a bit more space at the bottom to allow the author name to breathe.

You just bring it up a little bit and that would just give it a bit more breathing space, but it would make everything flow a bit better, so it would go from the sort of series name, it would flow down through the body, down to the type and then straight down. That way you've got a nice flow.

You've got the series name, you've got the title and you've got the author name, rather than it being right now is, the series title and the figure just go bang, and then you've got the rest of the information squeezed in at the bottom. That would just tighten that up.

I think in terms of colors, it's very monotone. I can see that they've tried to bring the red in of the hair, but it's caused her to go a little bit red as well, so they've emphasized the red of the hair and it's made her skin blush. I can see what they've done there.

There are other ways you can do that so you're just concentrating on the hair, but there's lots of purples. Everything sort of fades a little bit, so you need to just add in ... I mean, you know what I'm like, I like to throw in an extra color here and there, but it really does work, and even if it was just one color like on the Lady of the, yellows and greens work particularly well with purple.

Something like that would just give it a bit more emphasis and impact.

Other than that, my only real additional advice would be to bring more of a scene into the background, because at the moment there is something there, I think it's a table or something, but it would just give a bit more depth and a bit more setting. It would tie everything up nicely. Because it's just like there's a sky and the moon and then there's a random table and then there's her and they don't sort of fit.

Something, just the setting, some sort of scene. Doesn't matter what it is. It could be a forest, it could be a road, it could be anything. It could be another character, but just ... I just think something like that would just tie it all up and sort of tighten it up a little bit more.

James Blatch: Okay.

Stuart Bache: They're just my suggestions. I might be overly critical, but ...

James Blatch: No, that's what this is all about. We're in the laboratory.

James Blatch: The figure is very prominent in this cover and I know from looking at your covers, you prefer to have a little mystery about the person, so they're a little bit more distant, usually isolate.

Be it a romance cover, and I'm going to talk about the webinar that you and I have done where you create a romance cover from scratch and show how you put together ... And all these compositions. I'll give the URL now, which is selfpublishingformula.com/coverdesign, if you're interested in taking that webinar.

James Blatch: In that live creation process you do a very typical Stuart thing, which is the character is walking away from camera, is a little bit isolated, the scenery plays quite a big part in it, and that for me creates the intrigue that makes you want to know more.

Now that's not to say that this doesn't work, because the character clearly this is Gwen, I'm guessing, is the main character in the book and she's very

prominent here and that book's about her and she is the lady of the dead, but it doesn't set any intrigue going does it? It's like a portrait of her.

Stuart Bache: Yeah, absolutely. It's based on genre.

These sort of genres, if you look at any covers, anything on Amazon, you will see their faces. It just is how they are. You see the entire model in a pose or action pose. Very similar to urban fantasy, you always see the character.

They tend to also use the same model throughout so that there's always consistency, which is very hard when it comes to things like Shutterstock, to find the same model.

The reason I do that with things like crime and as you say with the romance, the webinar, the reason I do that is because it's really difficult to find a character that matches the character in the book. It's almost impossible, so what I used to do when I worked in-house, a publishing house like Harper Collins, we would crop people's faces off and we would do all sorts of stuff like that, because we would concentrate on getting the information right and the face was always wrong.

Find the way the person looks, at what the costume is, what they should be wearing and then the face would always be wrong, so you can't really Photoshop another face onto something because it's always noticeable.

You're probably seeing them everywhere and there's even critiques about these covers where you've got women's faces that have just been cropped off right, they've just got the chin and then the rest of their body, and people hate them but the reason they do that is because we could never find anyone that looked like the character in the book.

People don't actually like that very much because sometimes it just doesn't work. You're reading, you're going, well that doesn't feel like the right person or the person on the cover you start to imagine as the person in the book and that doesn't work either. But it is based on genre.

My rule is always about being familiar and working with your genre and what works in your genre is what you should do, and this is what works in the genre.

James Blatch: You do see the faces in that genre. I could see what you're saying.

In fact I had a discussion with the editor I'm working with on my book at the moment, about whether you describe the person or not, and she was very anti description and thinks it's a bit of an amateur mistake. It's very early on in the book, they look in a mirror and then they notice their ... It gives the writer a chance to describe them.

She said, well you should only say things that are relevant to the story and the character, which gives scope for you to imagine the person, right, and once you've placed the face on the cover, you've taken that bit away haven't you, but they're stuck with this is the person, which happens in films, right.

You say it's typical of this genre?

Stuart Bache: Absolutely. As you say, in lots of things that I do, I try my best to have them walking away or cropped in a certain way because it just makes it so much easier.

For a designer as well, when you're researching, you can get the perfect body and then someone will say, "That's not how my character looks. His hair would never look like that or the freckle on her face is in the wrong place," are whatever, and it is different for this genre, so I'm happy to let it go.

This is not something I would do personally, but I have designed stuff recently that in urban fantasy, very similar style and when I looked through all my research, when I was going through what works and what's really, really working at the moment, all of them had chose a model that would

work across a series, so there were several of this model, and they were all face forward.

James Blatch: Something to bear in mind when you're picking that initial stock image of the woman, that you've got to have some repetition if you're thinking ahead for the series.

Stuart Bache: Yeah.

James Blatch: In the time we've got, lets talk a little bit about some of the detail.

You talked about the prominence of the series title being slightly unusual, but commercially quite sensible.

Stuart Bache: I've never seen it like that. Well I probably have, but I haven't really seen one recently. It's one of the first things I even look at when I look at a cover. Usually they're just a line at the top and that's what I would do personally, but I have done them in the past where I've added flourishes to them to sort of ... Because the genre once again, just to make them stand out a little bit more.

I really like the way it's done. I like the sword going through the O and it's just ... And sort of becoming the I of Nights, so it's really clever, and you can then use that in your marketing, which is really clever.

James Blatch: That is really nice. Then one or two technical things that you alluded to.

First of all, the fonts are in genre, which is good. You talk about, again, you'll go through this in the webinar if people want to learn more about the process, but you mentioned that maybe the font colors don't stand out against the background as best as they could, don't pop.

Stuart Bache: No. It's a lot of purple. I understand why it's a lot of purple. Once again, it's sort of purple really fits with paranormal romance and urban fantasy, so I understand that.

But you always want to have something that allows your type to stand out a little bit more and a lot of people just add dark or dropped shadows to the back. It doesn't have to be bright, but it could just be a little bit more colorful.

Oranges, yellows, greens go really well with purple, so even if it's just a similar tone to how that purple. But in a different color, I think it would just really make it just go pop.

Then also, if the author has decided to use the purple across the series, for the background, then a good way of distinguishing them would be to have a different color for the type going through and that way you can distinguish between the books.

James Blatch: Okay, so yes, that popping, and you've talked about that in previous feedbacks to the color choices.

It's contrast I suppose is the word, isn't it? It just needs be a firmer contrast between the colors of the word and the background so that it's very easy to pick that out.

Now the other thing, which I think you haven't talked about before on these feedback sessions in the book lab, but was very interesting to me, is you can tell from your expert eye that they've accentuated the color of her hair.

As a result of that there's been some change in color on her skin, which you don't think has worked as well as it could have done.

Stuart Bache: No, it's one of those things. She's got red hair, they want to emphasize the hair. Well they've changed the color so you use the hue saturation tool in Photoshop and you select just reds only and then you whack the saturation up.

What that does is it picks up any pigment that's red, in the skin or in the clothing, and then that will all start to come out.

It's a great model and everything, but she looks like she's a bit embarrassed or she's about to do a speech that she's not sure she wants to do and she's getting a little bit blush on the neck everything. And that's just one of those things that no one else would probably notice that, but I've spotted it straight away.

James Blatch: Okay.

Stuart Bache: It's just about making those tones ... You can keep that hue saturation there but you can, as an adjustment layer, you can add a layer mask, which we talk about in the webinars and stuff a little bit.

Then what you do is you use your pen tool to just knock out the areas around the face and around any skin tones and what that will do is it means that it's affecting the hair, the places that you want it to affect, but it's not going to affect everything, so you're just removing where ... It will stop the blush basically.

James Blatch: Is there something to be said for that same tone of red being picked out on the building behind, to give it a kind of thematic ...

Stuart Bache: Oh it's a building. Sorry.

James Blatch: I think it's a building.

Stuart Bache: It is a building. It is a building.

James Blatch: You were saying table but ...

Stuart Bache: I thought it was a table with two candles on it.

James Blatch: That's so funny that you saw that.

Stuart Bache: Yeah, because I thought paranormal romance, maybe it's a spell.

James Blatch: Funny enough, I was looking down at the bottom. When you were saying table I was thinking, where is the table and I was thinking maybe that's a mattress behind her. Do you see on the ground?

Stuart Bache: Yeah. I know. I see.

James Blatch: It looks like a mattress.

Stuart Bache: It does.

James Blatch: Maybe that's where she lives and she sleeps outside because it's very warm.

Stuart Bache: Yeah, a very hot place.

James Blatch: Anyway, this kind of is what you were saying about the background not really being very definitive in this case.

Your preference is to have a more definite place for the character in the background.

Stuart Bache: Even if it wasn't a place and it was trees or something that worked with that a little bit more. Anything like that would just help and it would just tie it into her a little bit more as well.

Because I mean, even if that is a house then she's at the wrong angle if that's the case. She's a giant in that respect because she would have to be standing on a hill quite far away from it.

James Blatch: She might be levitating.

Stuart Bache: Do you you know actually, she might be levitating. I haven't read the book, so ...

James Blatch: I don't remember her levitating in the book, but there are some great things in the universe that Gretchen's created.

Stuart Bache: I should just mention quickly though.

James Blatch: Oh yes, go.

Stuart Bache: About what I just said, about not reading the book. The reason I don't read the books or try is because, and I never do, I just like to know the basic information because ... And that's not just for book lab, it's for all of my briefs. It's simply because as a potential reader, I won't have read the book, so when I design something it has to be something that will draw me to it without going into too much detail and everything.

I have to think like the buyer, not like someone who's a fan or a reader. Just dropping that in there.

James Blatch: That's great and that's very much part of the commercial focus that you always bring to covers.

We always say that it's not about something pretty hanging on the wall, it's about something that's going to sell your book and get your book into the hands of readers.

Stuart Bache: Exactly.

James Blatch: Great. The summary is that Gretchen's done a pretty good job in all areas of this and she's done a very in genre cover that's going to work for her genre, but she's got some critical feedback from an expert who worked with this all day every day and there's something that she can take from that.

We should say thank you and good bye, and I'm going to plug it one more time because you and I put together this webinar, which is an opportunity to talk about all of this.

You talk about font choice and genre choice and it's a brilliant thing to watch, even if you are commissioning your cover from somebody else, to understand what it is that makes a good cover work and sell a book, as it might be that you have a more commercial hold on that than a potential cover design, because some of them might just do pretty covers.

Then you actually do an instructional session where you build from scratch with a little bit of, what we call blue Peter moments in the UK, whereas a children's TV program where they cut from the beginning of the model towards then end. You've done that to move it forward so it's watchable within the time period, but it's a really good webinar.

Stuart Bache: It's full of information still as well. I'd still tell you what I've done, so even though I do cut to the ...

James Blatch: Yeah, we can't watch every little brush stroke, that would be several hours, but yes, and you can sign up for that, you can register for the webinar and watch it at a time convenient for you if you go to selfpublishingformula.com/coverdesign, all one word.

Stuart, thank you so much indeed for stepping inside the laboratory. It's been brilliant to get your feedback and we will talk to you next time we choose somebody else.

Stuart Bache: Absolute pleasure. Speak to you soon.

James Blatch: Okay, so Stuart's feedback is that did the job in terms of being in genre and he was pleased with that and happy that this is somebody who understands that at a glance your book needs to look like what it is. He was a bit picky about some aspects though, the skin blushing.

He could tell, I couldn't tell how they'd done it, but he said that they had changed the color of her and as a result of that the reds in her face and the neck had gone up, so she looked like she was embarrassed.

He was also a little bit critical of the proportions, so he said it was abstract in the sense that the character was very big and background was small, so she was either floating in the air.

It's the sort of things we don't necessarily pick out straight away, but it's the reason why the cover doesn't work and he would fix those things, but generally pretty good in genre cover, so some not bad feedback.

As always with Stuart, it's not just about it being pretty, it's about it selling books.

Mark Dawson: That's the aim for everything really.

Everything that can be improved before someone makes a decision to buy or not buy, that's what we're looking at, so cover, blurb and the look inside and probably in order of importance, so those are things that we look at.

James Blatch: Okay, well we're going to look at the blurb next and you must stay listening for the editor's feedback because it's going to be very useful session for us all, but let's move onto the blurb.

Our expert is BC, up there in Chicago. Bryan Cohen, he is the blurb guy and this is an interesting feedback session because he got hold of Gretchen and wanted to know more about the story because he felt it needed to be little bit more in terms of hooks to get people in through the blurb, so let's hear how Bryan worked through the process.

James Blatch: Bryan Cohen, Lady of the Dead. Well not Bryan Cohen Lady of the Dea, but Bryan Cohen, Lady of the Dead, we're going to talk about. You have to be very careful with punctuation.

Bryan Cohen: It's true. It's true. Those commas that when placed incorrectly the panda shoots ...

James Blatch: Eats, shoots and leaves.

Bryan Cohen: Shoots and leaves. That's tough.

James Blatch: Anyway, we're not perhaps going to talk specifically about punctuation, but we are going to talk to the blurb king of the world, BC, and you've had a look at the blurb and we can say again that you can download the before and after of the blurb for Lady of the Dead at selfpublishingformula.com/booklab3.

James Blatch: I'm going to chip in straight away and say I think this is quite a long way from the sort of thing that you would have recommended.

Bryan Cohen: Yes, and it's not that it's bad. I think Gretchen did a pretty good job here. It's a fairly complex book. I think there's a lot going on.

This is actually the kind of situation, we ended up grilling Gretchen interview style to make sure that we understood exactly what was happening because there's a lot of nuance, which goes into a great book, a great story, and to get more information, to make sure we knew where every character was coming from, we went deeper.

I think it shows in this blurb that she created initially, that it is complex and so attempting to boil it down to the essential, it can be a challenge, which is why maybe the original blurb didn't come off as well as it perhaps could have.

James Blatch: We said this last time we talked about this, it is difficult for people who spend a lot of time writing 120,000 plus word novels to suddenly have to put this fantastically complex and beautifully interwoven story into 100 words, is always a challenge.

Okay, so lets have a look. I actually liked the very first sentence of her blurb and I want to talk to you about your thoughts about this, but she starts off, "A lady of the dead only comes along once in a century." I think that's a really good first line.

"Gwen knows this makes her valuable, but she hates the constant supervision of her warrior guards." Then it gets quite narrative based, a lot of information coming out there.

Your first line, "She's a powerful captive. He fights wars and his own longing. To stop a deadly spirit rebellion, will she sacrifice her freedom and her heart?" That's the first thing to say, is that you've done what you do do, and you do it very well, is you've created a bit of tension and some intrigue and question mark, and that's probably, despite the great start I think that Gretchen made, probably lacking from her first line.

Bryan Cohen: I think that you're right, that it is a strong first line that she has, but in a way it is plot based. We don't know what a lady of the dead is, we don't have the context and obviously it has that Buffy the Vampire Slayer, chosen one vibe right from the get go.

I would say that her first line is more of the first line of a synopsis rather than a hook. And that it's just missing a hook entirely, because I think a plot based hook is not likely to succeed.

It maybe more so in a thriller, maybe more so in something where there's a ticking time bomb, but for paranormal romance, and I don't know if you guys did this intentionally going from a thriller to a romance to now something more in the fantasy paranormal realm, is that we need to make these characters shine because there's a lot of paranormal romance out there.

We need to know, why is the girl awesome, why is the guy awesome, why are these characters worth paying attention to and so in our hook we give what the emotional bit for Gwen, the lady of the dead is, is that yes she is powerful, she is the lady of the dead, but she is also, in a way, held captive by her power and so in those four words, "She's a powerful captive," we try to show where she's coming from in a very, very small number of words.

James Blatch: Yes and that's the time you've got to capture somebody's attention. And so as you do, you create the story, create the question marks and give a reason to carry on reading, which I think works very nicely.

Gretchen's next line, and I have to say there is a bit of a cardinal sin. I'm sorry to have to mention this Gretchen, but there is typo I believe in this line, and I think it's still there on Amazon as we speak at the moment, so she says, "Caesar has been King of North America through several wars and rebellions. When one of his generals informs him these new rumors involve the lady of the dead, he flies to Seattle himself investigate, posing as his second in command. The instant attraction he feels to Gwen becomes increasingly hard to ignore."

There's a typo so you can't really underline enough that you need to get somebody else to proof this, because we all don't really see our own errors.

Bryan Cohen: One tip I always give, and I don't know if I've given it on the show yet, but when you are getting an editor to proof your book, if they're willing and you can throw in your description as well, it only ends up being another 200 words. It's likely they might not even charge you for editing that much, if you're working on it yourself.

James Blatch: That a really good tip.

Now your next line is, "Gwen's abilities to use the spirit world make her powerful, but they've sucked her freedom. As the first lady of the dead born in North American Kingdom, she's been guarded day and night for the last 20 years. When her ghostly allies reveal a dangerous rebellion brewing, a handsome, war weary general shows up to demand her loyalty in the upcoming fight. Little does she know that the arrogant leader has his own type of power."

You create, again, this intrigue, this new dimension comes in in terms of the story, that this new handsome war hero...

The word handsome's very deliberate here, right?

Bryan Cohen: Yes.

James Blatch: This is paranormal romance and you're writing to genre?

Bryan Cohen: Yes and we did. Actually when Gretchen and our team had a back and forth, we did check in to make sure Gwen does like the King Caesar, and she said that there is a mutual attraction there.

She mostly sees him as attractive, as sexy, handsome, but Caesar obviously has, as we'll get into, a little bit more riding on their relationship.

The word handsome there isn't just meant to be an objective, oh he's objectively handsome, it's meant to imply that Gwen also sees him as handsome, thus trying to start this little thread of a, hey maybe they'll get together, because otherwise ...

It's a little bit of a fine line with this one, James, because she's kind of beholden to the kingdom, she's a prisoner of the kingdom and he's the king, so we don't want it to be this completely one-sided situation because that could make it seem like an abusive relationship.

We try to avoid that by establishing that yes, she does have some kind of attraction toward him.

James Blatch: She says, "The instant attraction he feels to Gwen becomes increasingly hard to ignore." So, she's definitely setting up as well, which is good.

I think this is why you were in the big bucks here, but along the way you've written that a handsome war-weary general shows up to demand her loyalty. So, you don't have to say, he finds her attractive.

That's a nice example of 'don't tell me the moon shining. Show it with the glint on the piece of glass' which we talked about with Jennie on the editorial side as well. It's a nice use of language.

In terms of what they're doing. Those two lines I think do similar things. And then we get to the last line in Gretchen's original.

Bryan Cohen: So, we have the same mistake actually at one point we talked to her and said, "Does Gretchen find Caesar attractive?" When we really meant to say Gwen? And she said, "Oh, for a fictional character. Sure." So, it's tough with the two G, the G author and the G protagonists.

James Blatch: Gretchen's last line about Gwen is, "Will Caesar be able to protect Gwen, while battling his lust? Will Gwen stay with her warrior God or will Caesar's dominating nature, push her to switch sides? Hidden alliances surface in the lady of the dead."

Again, I think it's a strong finish. I'd like the last line of that. I like the first one and the last one of this, and I think the middle bit, as you say, does a pretty good job. What you've come up with in your blurb is longer. Let's talk about duration in a moment. As the king struggles with the maddening, the increasing-

Bryan Cohen: Can we just skip over a bit with my ... because there's-

James Blatch: Oh, in terms of the story. You've come up. The maddening and this is obviously from you gleaning some more information from Gretchen about the book. 'As the king struggles with the maddening, the increasingly powerful lady, the dead escapes without a trace, with the rebellion Eminence and Caesar quickly losing his mind. Gwen has a choice, protect the king and the kingdom that held her captive or risk a terrible war to win her own freedom.'

And you've gone on to a couple of extra bits, which is kind of the end of the narrative and the beginning of the ... this is why you should buy this book. The Lady of the Dead, is the first book in the Night World Paranormal Romance series. If you like powerful characters, irresistible attraction and magical mayhem, then you will love Gretchen S.B.'s sensual fantasy, buy Lady of the Dead to leap into an alluring world of spirits today.

So a few things to talk about and we're going to go over some things that you've talked about before, because they're important. But first of all, duration.

Yours is a longer blurb and includes a couple of bits at the end?

Bryan Cohen: Yes. And we did cover it all.

It's longer and that is an effort to try to, I would say there's a quality to this book. There's a lot of interesting little bits happening and it's an effort not to skip over things. I did want to bring up from the bit we didn't cover.

We've got Gretchen's, the instant attraction he feels to Gwen becomes increasingly hard to ignore. As we dug in with Gretchen to find out more, there's actually kind of a situation in this world building where, when the main character ... when a male touches his meant-to-be mate, if he doesn't take her to bed in three days, he goes crazy.

James Blatch: Interesting.

Bryan Cohen: And I thought. Well, those sound like some high stakes that aren't mentioned in the original blurb.

So we have this line earlier. "When a chance touch sends a flash of energy through his body, Caesar learns two things, Gwen is meant to be his mate and if he fails to better, he'll go mad in just three days."

Putting that in there, it does a couple of things that the original burb doesn't have, and this is one of the reasons why ... I would say this is even a little touch longer than our regular descriptions.

You're right to think about duration here, but we wanted to make sure that Caesar's stakes are in there, that he's not just the guy who's king, who finds her attractive.

It's actually ... the kingdom is in dire straits here. The leader of the kingdom will literally go crazy and not be able to rule if he doesn't take her to bed.

Now, yes, this is active romance. There is some sexual content that's going to be in here, but we have to imply that that's going to be in there, because a lot of paranormal romance readers like the sexy stuff, and so we need to say, hey, it's likely that the plot machinations of this book will lead to time in the bedroom. We, we want to bring that in there.

James Blatch: If that's a feature of the book, it's important to signal that in the blurb of what you're saying. Don't be afraid to.

Bryan Cohen: Yes. We can be too coy, if we leave that out. I think that with this genre in particular where people are expecting mystical, magical things happening and they're expecting there to be a more explicit content. We want to at least show that yes, that's happening, and yes, the second thing is happening.

They're going to be in there, worry not reader who loves paranormal romance. You will get everything you want and more. And then that's why we use words like essential fantasy, irresistible attraction, alluring world of spirits. You're getting everything you want and more

James Blatch: Keywords to signal that the good stuff is in there. So apologies for missing out that line and well done for politely picking me up. There was a double line in the middle that you alluded to.

People will see in the blurb when they download it.

And then, the final thing, just to talk about briefly here, Bryan, is the fact that you do then move on from a description of the book and the narrative and you give reasons for buying it.

And finally you say buy the book, which is a really obvious movement in this every time, so really obvious, but important thing to say in a blurb which is being read by somebody thinking about buying your book is to tell them to buy the book.

Bryan Cohen: Yes. There's a whole copywriting world out there that has nothing to do with book descriptions that talks about sales pages and sales letters and everything. I hear this phrase tossed about and I think it can be used and applied to the book description world as well, is that the people who read longer copy on book descriptions are the ones who buy books.

There's always this. Well, isn't that sales page too long? No one's going to read all that.

Well, the people who do read it are the ones who are book buyers. So if we make the effort and, and we always try to be succinct, of course, if we can say something in five words instead of seven words, we're going to do it, but if we have this awesome sounding story.

Frankly, I think Gretchen has put together something really strong here and I think the reviews are going to indicate that, and obviously Stewart's new cover and Jennie's revisions in the book are going to indicate that.

If you have something good, don't hide it. Don't keep it too close to the vest. You want to share it in the description.

We have to go into a few story details in order to share. Yes. There is a fact in this world where if a person does not have relations with the person that they're meant to be with, then they actually go crazy that it's not the hook of the book.

But for the people who like that aspect of paranormal romance, it may as well be a hook. And so it needs to be included. And because it's a little funky, it needs to be explained, which takes a few words here and there, but those who love that stuff are going to appreciate that it's in the blurb and it might make them more likely to buy the book.

James Blatch: Great. Well, I think you're quite right, Bryan, some brilliant story ideas in this book from Gretchen. She's clearly talented at coming up with a universe that's intriguing and some nice little bits in there that just

make the universe one that you want to read about. Well done, Gretchen on that. Well done, Bryan, for coming up with that.

Bryan Cohen: Thank you.

James Blatch: That's a sync up. I would encourage people to download the before and after and look at what Bryan has one and have a look at ... Well we'll talk to Gretchen about her thoughts about this, of course in this episode.

But then over time we'll try and find out what's happened to the book and what difference these things make it, because they do make a big difference.

Bryan Cohen: They do. And I can't take 100% credit for this. I do have a team and we all worked on it together.

The whole Best Page Forward process was put into action for multiple people, but I do want to thank Gretchen, because she was such a good sport with us. Gathering as much information as possible from her, a lot. A little bit extra back and forth than usual, but what we really appreciate it.

And of course, we appreciate you and Mark and company for letting us take a crack at this and share what we did on air.

James Blatch: Well, all pleasure. Thanks Bryan.

Bryan Cohen: Sure thing.

James Blatch: Okay. There's Bryan and his feedback and as always did a really thorough job. Him and his team. So they spoke to Gretchen.

You're going to hear from Gretchen at the end of this podcast episode, but she loved the bit where Bryan mistook the main character Gwen for Gretchen and got the names mixed up and I think she thought that was particularly bringing everything to life.

But Bryan, again, I think probably the biggest improvement Gretchen will see from this process is rewriting her blurbs, because Bryan did quite a lot of work on that.

That's not to say her blurb didn't work at all, although there was a typo in there. I saw the typo in the copy and I went to Amazon thinking it must be fixed and it was still there.

Obviously it's something that happens to the best of us, but you can't really underline enough to try and make sure that you used to read everything of those sorts of things, because clearly you're a writer and that's going to have a knock on effect.

So those things are fixed and you're going to hear from Gretchen at the end of this interview. But what she thought about that blurb feedback, but it's important blurb.

Who writes your blurbs, Mark?

Mark Dawson: Me, I quite a lot of blurbs. They're not easy it just takes a little bit of practice to different skill to writing an 80,000 word novel, it's just a letter. A couple of 100 words maximum, really. Then I do that.

Bryan has done a couple for me before, but I think just for me, it's something I don't need to hand that off to anybody I can do myself.

James Blatch: And do you think sometimes it's difficult because you'll feel like you're doing a disservice to an 80,000 word novel by distilling into a few throw away lines?

Mark Dawson: No, no, it's not a disservice. You're actually giving a chance to sell as many copies as possible.

So it's a service, but is just a different skill, say take something that is sprawling and you've been working on for a couple of months and then to try and encapsulate everything in a much, much, much, much smaller

collection of words. Practice really, for me, it makes perfect. I'm better than I used to be. I quite like doing it.

James Blatch: I can't believe I'm still wearing this Fubu shirt. You should have told me to change. I've got another T-shirt there.

If you listened to last week, even though I'm wearing my gift to Ali, but it's now getting to the point where he might want to wash it before wearing it.

Okay. We are moving on now to the editor now. We're going into overtime and we will probably change who the experts just to freshen things up and also we are calling on these guys to do quite a lot of work for us for these book lab episodes, so that they also they enjoy it.

We have gone with a Jennie Nash, for change of tone, for the editorial feedback. Jennie looks at the Look Inside and then gives us some feedback on her impression of it.

Jennie identified one thing in particular let us to have very early on and she gave us some really good feedback on that. So let's hear from Jennie.

Jennie Nash from Author Accelerator. We've got to welcome you into the book lab.

Jennie Nash: Thank you.

James Blatch: First of all your first venture into the SPF book club. And I'm sorry we haven't got white coats and make it look like a fair, like a laboratory environment, but it's ... Well, we're used to better for us, right? And figurative writing.

Jennie Nash: That's correct. I'm happy to be here.

James Blatch: Excellent. Your job is to look at the Look Inside, which is relatively new. In an ideal world you'd have read the whole book and we'd spend three hours talking about it. The reality of a podcast is that you've had a look at the look inside. So I think gives you a pretty good idea of the

writing and we want your critical feedback for the author going to help her in this case move forward.

What did you think of *Lady of the Dead*?

Jennie Nash: Well, first of all, the idea of just looking at the excerpt is really important, because that's what the reader is going to do.

You can look at that excerpt and they decide whether or not to buy, and that's the time you have to hook them. And this particular book has an engaging title and engaging premise.

When you read the write-up of it, it seems like this is good. It's paranormal romance and there's particular things that are reader is looking for when they liked that genre. All these basic building blocks are good.

But the second you start reading this excerpt, a problem emerges. That is a big problem and a common problem and that is the dreaded info dump.

James Blatch: Now, you gave me a little heads up on this, and we could flag this up right at the beginning.

You're going to offer a very handy handout as a guide of what Info dump saw, why they're not a good thing. So that's going to go along in the PDF that goes with this episode.

Let's talk basics then a little bit of info. Let me just say from a writing point of view, it's the easiest thing in the world to get into, right? Because you think you think your reader needs the context. You're telling this story.

You think your reader won't understand or all the story's going to be better with the more information they've got.

But I know you're going to tell me there's a way of getting the information out there and it's not. It's not the info dump.

Jennie Nash: That's exactly right. So, the info dump is exactly what it sounds like. It's, it's the author dumping stuff on the reader, just dumping it in and the author is thinking, okay, my reader's got to have this information that is at the start of a series. It's a start of a book. They've got to know this.

It's very hard to see in your own work when you're doing this. I think that somewhere it's easy to see in other people's work when they're doing it.

So this is a really great exercise for writers right now to go look at these pages and see if you can identify the info dump. Now sometimes ... and there's a lot here, a lot of info dumping.

It doesn't have to be giant block of text, it sometimes can be, but it can be even just a few lines here and there.

And the problem with it is that the definition of the info dump is what we just said, the writer dumping this stuff on you. But what the reader wants us to be in the story. We want to be in it.

We want to be in the character's head and we want to be in that scene. We want to be in the moment and an info dump yanks us out of the moment.

It's like a flag waving saying, "Look, I am an author. I'm in here and I've got something to say to you." It's almost like instead of being in the story, we're now in a lecture hall and the author's lecturing us about the story.

And so info dump stops the narrative cold and pulls the reader out. And if you've lost the reader even for a second, they're going to go watch TV or get a snack, or take a nap. They're not going to stay in your story. So that's the danger of info dumps.

James Blatch: It's almost the equivalent of breaking the fourth wall, which they do sometimes deliberately in TV and how they seem to do a lot these days, but actually it doesn't immediately take you out of any kind of pretense that you were in the story.

And the reason this is important, Jennie, is because there's so much competition for readers these days, is you've got to really focus on these in keeping the reader in the story, right?

Jennie Nash: Oh, absolutely. And you have to think about what the experience of reading is like for your own self. We're all readers, we know what it's like. You want to be transported, you want to be carried away, you want to know what it's like to be in someone else's head.

This is the power of the novel, to be in somebody else's head, to feel what it's like to be in their skin, to be in their shoes, to be in their world, and we want to be in it.

We don't want to be outside with our face pressed against the glass looking at it. We want to be in it, and if we're not in it, the power of the novel goes away. And to your point, they'll go read something else.

So it is a really big problem. And in this particular case, in this particular excerpt, the author is info dumping literally right from the start and there's some clues that you can see it very clearly in this very first paragraph, "The Night World stole me from reality. No a better way to put it is that the Night World weaned me from the normalcy of what most people would consider a real world."

So that that phrase, 'Gwen began by way of explanation,' the author is actually giving away the fact that she's info dumping. She's actually saying the character's explaining things right from the start and the reader is dropped into this dialogue.

We don't know where we are. We don't know where we are in time or space. We don't know who this person is and they're already explaining the world to us.

So there's a distance for the reader right from that very first sentence and it continues down.

There's a setup in this opening where this woman, Gwen, the main character who is the Lady of the Dead, is talking about her past. So there's a whole conceit here that the writer has set up where it's almost as if she's saying, "Before we even get started with a story, let my character explain who she is and explain her past."

And she set up a conversation where the character is presumably telling somebody else's information, but really this is the author saying, "Okay, reader, I want you to know everything and I'm gonna just dump it all on you here."

The problem keeps compounding. When we're in dialogue, when we're in a scene, we want to know what's going on with that character? What do they want? What's their agenda?

Everybody in a scene has an agenda. They want something. They want something from somebody else. They want to get something. They want to protect something.

Maybe they're lying, maybe they're ... whatever the thing is, and that's what we want to feel and to know, and to be in. And unfortunately in this scene, we don't get that. We just get, here's this chunk of information about this woman and her background in the story.

I want to call this out because I think this is a really great example for your listeners to be able to recognize an info dump, and then we can talk about, well, how would you fix it?

So a bit further down, there's a paragraph that begins, "Raider grinned at her," if they can identify that paragraph, "Raider grinned at her."

We're in this bit of dialogue with Gwen, and Raider is her guard and protector, and her friend. We already have that established, and they're having a conversation in which Gwen is talking about her past. And there's a moment when Raider comes into it and this is how it reads. "Raider grinned at her. She had known him since she was 17, 10 years now. Gwen

had harbored a minor crush on him when they first met, but it found out what he was in his first life and the feelings had faded.

A first life is what warriors called their first century. Everything after that is considered their second life. Raider's first life consisted of raiding tombs in the 1700s. The young Gwen had been crushed that the gorgeous man before her was not only far too old for her, but a professional thief as well. Raider kept his light brown hair, a little shaggy and his sharp jaw clean shaven. His blood nose showed signs of a bad break. The break must've occurred very young, because at 30 a warrior's body became too strong for scarring like that."

Now this is in the middle of a bit of dialogue. We get who this guy is, when they met, that she's had a crush on him, that there's something about the warriors in this world that gives them special powers, that they live a really long time. Then he had a broken nose. What does that mean?

I just counted 10 bits of information that are dumped into this paragraph that don't actually have anything to do with what's happening in the scene. That's the sign of an info dump. You could have some of that information folded into dialogue if it had to deal with what the story present is.

James Blatch: That's what I wanted to come on to some more: positive advice on how to spot your info dump.

I'm thinking it through now and I suppose if it's not something you would genuinely be thinking.

So you're chatting to somebody you know, if you're not sitting there thinking, "Hmm, he started as a vet 25 years ago," and that scope, if you're not going to be thinking about that then maybe don't put it in the book.

Just talk about what you would be thinking about. "He looks older."

Little things that you had noticed at the time, at the moment and is that a better way of doing it, of getting the information there if it's needs to be?

Jennie Nash: The role that I always teach about info dumping, usually the info that you've got there, that you've dumped there is really good information that you want to convey. There's usually not anything wrong with the information, it's just where you've placed it.

And so it's not like, "Oh, you have to axe that, get rid of it." It's just how are you going to fold this in? How are you going to weave it in? When is the best time to do that? And this is the art of the narrative, of writing a narrative.

You always want to be in story present. So that's what you were referring to. When we're having a dialogue, two characters or a group are having a dialogue, that's we're in the moment and by story present, I want to just make sure everybody understands that term.

You could be writing in past tense, you could be writing in present tense, story present is just literally the chronology of the story as it's being told, and it's the timeline of the narrative. And you always want to stay in story present.

What happens is that we're triggered, in real life this happens as well. Something triggers a memory, something triggers you to notice something in somebody else. You're in the moment, you're in story present but you think, "oh yeah, there's a scar or there's not a scar. Or that means he's older, wait."

You're constantly trying to make sense of things as the reader and as the character actually. And that the way you would bring in information is if that moment in story present actually triggers that thing, that then you could go back and talk about how, in this case, how warriors lives are lived, how they

move through time. It would make perfect sense if there was something in story present that triggered that.

James Blatch: So in this case, potentially Gwen could have reminded him that he used to be a thief at a time that maybe he was saying something else. "Well, you used to rob graves," as a kind of a character building thing between them or something like that.

What you're saying is it needs to be a real in the moment thing to introduce a bit of information about the past.

Jennie Nash: Yes, and actually right before that paragraph, the author does this very well.

There's a sentence right before the one we just looked at and just to remind everyone, Raider grinned at her, is the paragraph I just read and we looked at. And just before that is a line when it goes like this, "Gwen glared at him until he looked away. Yeah, he was definitely young. Older warriors would not give in that easily."

So there's a moment where there's a little bit of information that she gives that has absolutely to do with what's happening in the moment.

It gives the reader some info and some context, but it doesn't pull us out of the story. It's just right there in it. And you trip along, and you keep moving.

What the info dump does is it just stops the story. It doesn't have to do with the flow of what's going on. I love this word 'trigger'. What does the action in story present or the dialogue trigger in that character? Why?

One way to really think about this is to pay attention in your own life and this is a very hard thing to do. I've tried to do it many times and it's really hard, but the exercise of doing it is what's valuable.

You try to pay attention to your own thoughts even just for five minutes or a minute, and your thoughts move so fast, and they're spinning through

context all the time to try to make meaning of something. They're pulling information from your past and your experience to make sense of things, and you can watch your mind doing this and it moves, it goes so fast that it's hard to slow it down, but we're constantly doing that.

Something as simple as your partner says to you, "What do you want for dinner tonight? Do you want to order Thai food?"

And you instantly think, "Oh, the last time he had Thai food, it wasn't very good and there was that sauce, and did we go to that place? Did we have it with our friends? And they had a better Thai food place and maybe we should go there. And maybe I don't actually want Thai. Maybe we don't want some Mexican food."

That's all going through your head as you're just trying to answer the question, "What do you want order for dinner?" That's how the human mind works.

We want to try to mimic that in the writing, so that that's what puts us in the character's head. Is we're watching them make sense of the world and pull in this information.

Gwen is going to have a time in the story when it makes perfect sense to talk about, like you said, thieving or raiding tombs, or how warriors age, or how she works with these different people at different times in her life. What any of that means.

There's going to be a moment when it makes sense for her to have that in her head. And that's what we're looking for, is that internal logic of the story.

The best way to think about this with info dumps is to just slow down. So normally, an info dump, you're whizzing through something. And normally what the writer is thinking is, "I've got to just get this down. I've just got to get it out and the reader just has to know it. So I'm gonna just dump it out here and then move on."

If you slow down and I love the word unfold, let it unfold. Let the scene unfold. Let this information unfold. Let the way the character makes sense of things unfold so that the unfolding is what the reader comes for. We want to be in it, we want to see it.

We want to be in the present as it's happening, as they're making sense of things. So slowing down is the first way to prevent an info dump.

James Blatch: Okay. So you don't have to get everything out that you've carefully worked out this back history to everything. And this can be quite subtle things.

There might be an occasion where Gwen has second thoughts about going into something with this guy and thinks to herself, "But he used to be a robber," to use this one point in this one sentence where the she's info dumped it there.

But that would be okay to have a bit of internal thought of hers hesitating about going into something and that does get out some information at the same time because it's part of the story of her.

It's informing our actions.

Jennie Nash: That's exactly right. And even the piece about at the end of that paragraph that I read the piece where she's speaking about his appearance now, his shaggy hair and his sharp jaw, and his broken nose. And she says, "The break must've occurred very young because at 30, a warrior's body became too strong for scarring like that." So describing some...

Describing somebody's appearance is always really tricky because again in real life when you meet somebody, you're using their physical cues to assess, really are they safe? Is this person safe? Are they how I feel about this person? I read a lot of neuroscience about this.

It's even back to the idea of are you in my tribe or not? Which is why we have so many problems in our society right now and culture right now about judging people to be not in your tribe based on appearance.

But those things that are going through our head are going so quickly through our head that you're not ... It feels very false to say ... have a character say, "Oh yeah, his hair's a little shaggy and he's clean shaven."

Why would you recognize that on somebody. She knows this guy so why in the middle of this would she look at his appearance? That again is logic. That makes no sense, she knows this guy.

Her stopping to describe the appearance is an info dump. She could easily use that information and fold it into the narrative the way we talked about a minute ago that she did with, "Oh yeah, that guy's definitely young. He isn't making this comment that young people make."

James Blatch: I'm interested in this point about description because if it's not part of the story, the young man doesn't need to be handsome or rugged or the young woman doesn't need to be beautiful for any particular reason.

Do you need to describe at all? Or can you leave that?

Jennie Nash: I don't think so and usually people do it very poorly. There is a very classic thing that a lot of writers do when they're first beginning writing, which is they have a main character look in a mirror or catch their reflection in the window. And that's the author's way of describing what that main character looks like.

Because if the story is in that main character's head ... If I'm telling you a story, I don't think about how I look in the context of everyday life. I don't look in the mirror and think, "Well, she had brown curly hair and was wearing a purple sweater." I don't think that.

If I look in the mirror, there's a reason that I'm looking in the mirror and there's something I'm seeing that matters to what I'm doing.

And if I'm telling a story, I could use that information. I could say for example, she adjusted her glasses and hoped that the thick lenses didn't make her eyes appear funny. I'm making this up on the spot. It's sort of terrible. But something about that moment and the glasses and there's a reason to talk about it. If there's not a reason to talk about it, saying ... Those kinds of descriptions always feel like an info dump.

And there is nothing in a story, and I mean nothing that shouldn't be part of the whole world of it, the whole message of it and that includes setting, it includes weather, it includes how people look, how people move, how they talk. You don't need to put that on the page unless that main character is making sense of it.

If you walk outside and the character says, "It's a rainy day." We don't care if it's a rainy day unless that rain is going to mean something to that character or impact them in some way. Or maybe they're going to say, "It's another rainy day and I feel blue again and this is the way things are for me now. And poor me." That's great. Now we're using the weather to get at something internal.

Every single thing has to serve the story, and it has to serve the story in that moment.

So back to how to fix the info dump. The first thing is to know what it is, and to identify it in other people's work where you can and then try to identify it in your own work.

And I think the very best way to do this is to read your work out loud. I don't know if you noticed but when I was reading these bits of this book in question, it's actually really hard to read an info dump. I'm not an actor and I am not trained as an actor but you can even feel it when you're reading it.

When you read good dialogue that's snapping along and a good story and really in it there's a rhythm and a flow to it. It feels natural. It feels organic.

When I was reading these pieces, even in your mouth, it feels like that very first paragraph that ended ... of the very first paragraph of the piece that ends with Gwen began by way of explanation, there's no way to actually read that and have it flow and have it be rhythmic.

You have to stop and then you have to say it and it feels tapped on and that should be a clue, "Okay, something's not right here."

I used to have this very funny experience when I had my own books come out. And I would do a bookstore reading and you would be there reading from the pages of your book, "Here I am reading chapter seven." And I mean these are words that you just ... they are etched in your brain. You wrote them, they're in your book, here they are, you own them.

I would read them and they would oftentimes be a word that when I was reading didn't feel right or didn't sit right or I didn't like and I would change it while I was reading to make a better sentence.

James Blatch: Editing your own book as you went along.

Jennie Nash: Yeah. A finished book as it went along. So reading something out loud is an incredibly effective way to feel how it goes.

If you can't trippingly read it, then by trippingly I mean it trips off the tongue, it's very rhythmic. You should stop and think, "Okay, what's going on here?"

Another thing that I recommend is to print your pages out and take a highlighter and literally highlight every instance where information is conveyed just on a page or two of your own work.

Information is everything: It's how someone looks, it's the setting, it's the weather, it's backstory, it's any sort of just information being conveyed. And

ask yourself, does this logically belong in this moment? Does this logically belong and story present with this character or these characters actually be talking about this thing?

James Blatch: Famously, beautifully written books very often have beautiful descriptions of ... The old line is but don't tell me the moon is a full moon, tell me about the glint of the moon on a bit of glass, which alludes to the poetic nature of writing.

But you will say that there should be no place for simply a description of a beautiful scene unless it's meaningful to the story and to the character and there's a reason for them observing it or noticing it.

Jennie Nash: That's exactly right. And that famous quote is about Show Don't Tell. And the vast majority of times people new to writing get that directive wrong, what Show Don't Tell means.

They think that show means, "I'm going to describe the moon, and I'm going to describe the light and I'm going to described the glint on the glass. And I'm going to describe all this ... The things in the room in the moonlight and I'm going to show all the things that's what I'm going to show." And their mistake is that that is literal. That's the literal interpretation of Show Don't Tell.

Show Don't Tell, what it really means is show us what it means, show us it unfolding, show us what that was like for that person. Show Don't Tell really should be internal and deep and story driven and not just the physical surface of things.

I don't have it in front of me but the quote you're talking about actually has an extra line on it and I can't recall it right now. But the extra line is never part of the quote that is shared and it goes to this thing we're talking about, this idea not just physical description but a story description.

James Blatch: We're going to have to wrap things, we're coming up 30 minutes and we've got three contributors. It's great. It's brilliant. And we can run a bit long, that's not a big issue but we should probably think about

Is there anything else specifically you wanted to say about the look inside before we finished or are you happy to leave it as it is?

Let's try and wrap this up and talk about any other observations you had about the look inside that we could feed back to Gretchen.

Jennie Nash: I love the setup that Gretchen has and she's got this fantastic lady of the dead who comes once a century and that's just a really cool conceit. And she's got this war that's happening, there's going to be a romance.

She's got a really good grasp of story and a really exciting thing set up. I would just recommend to slow down a little bit. And it really has to do with trusting your reader.

You don't have to worry that they're not going to be with you or that they're not going to rest if something's slowly unfolding. If there's a sense that a character wants something and there's something in their way, and there's a conflict happening which Gwen in this piece has, the reader wants to know what happens.

The reader wants to know how is this going to go, how's this is going to unfold and in a romance, how are these people going to get together. She actually doesn't get together with the guy in the scene, it's somebody else apparently. But how is this woman going to find love?

Those are the things that yank us in it.

So you want to trust your story and trust your reader and let it unfold a bit more and I think if Gretchen were to spend a little more time on this scene and let us ... invite us into it a little bit more and drop the breadcrumbs of

information that we need rather than dump them, she will improve this work enormously.

James Blatch: That's fantastic Jenny. Thank you so much indeed for your first appearance here inside the book laboratory. You can hang your white coat up on and take your safety goggles off as you leave. That's great. Thank you so much indeed. It's been really useful. We will hear what Gretchen has to say about all this feedback and hopefully she's going to take it all on board and go forward.

Jennie Nash: Excellent. Well, I wish you the best of luck and all the listeners too.

James Blatch: So the positives from Jenny were that was really good conceit and some really good ideas in there. And then the negative was right from the beginning, she saw what she described as info dumping.

Jenny explained it very clearly, takes the reader out of the story, out of why should I read the next sentence and starts filling them in on stuff.

I get this because I'm working with Jenny. You've got to be better at that in telling the story. It's a Show Don't Tell type of thing, you've got to tell it through the actions and you don't always need to do.

You'll hear from Gretchen in a minute and we should remember this is her first book and she's written a lot of books. So it's a little bit unfair in terms of our impression of her as a writer. But it's a good thing for the book lab to see that and particularly for writers starting out.

Mark Dawson: That's fine. I mean these kinds of things get easier with practice. I used to be guilty of info dumps as much as the next writer. I quite like now this lacing it through a narrative so I know 100% more than I'm actually putting into the book. 90% more, I'm putting up to 10% and then leaving the rest out.

And it kind of gives it a depth. If it's done properly, just gives the reader a flavor that you know exactly what you're talking about.

I'm writing about the Berlin Wall at the moment, I'm doing a book set in Berlin in the 80s just before the wall comes down. And so I know lots about the Berlin Wall now. I know how people would get underneath it, I know how they built it, where the stone came from, all of that kind of stuff.

That's of no interest to the reader. I shouldn't be unfair to Dan Brown but this is the kind of thing you might expect to see in a book about that.

The academics saw the Berlin Wall and wondered at the 10 foot slabs of concrete that he suspected must have been reinforced with metal rods. You can go on and on and it just gets boring. The reader doesn't really need to know that. They just need to drop in a few facts so that the reader knows that you know what you're talking about.

James Blatch: I wouldn't test Dan Brown over this. Because I think he does have a way of telling the story that that gets the information in there.

Mark Dawson: He's very well known for info dumps.

James Blatch: Okay.

Mark Dawson: He's also well known for selling billions of books. I'm not going to criticize him much.

James Blatch: You should talk to me because I crossed the Berlin Wall in 1984.

Mark Dawson: You did?

James Blatch: Yes, I did. I didn't get shot or anything. I went to East Berlin, it was all black and white. There was the joke they said as you get on the train is that you're entering East Berlin, set your watch back 25 years. But it was fascinating, absolutely fascinating to go there that time. I haven't been back

to Berlin since actually. It's not much about the Cold War. I don't know. And there you go. Good. Well, I think it's time to hear from Gretchen then.

Let's congratulate anybody who puts themselves forward for this because you're being exposed to our SPF podcast audience and we have lots of downloads now. We're well past half a million, it must be at some point going to get to a million.

Well done Gretchen for taking part in it. Let's hear what she thought about those pieces of feedback.

All right Gretchen, so I sent you the feedback you got from the three people.

First of all, before we get into the details, what was it like receiving that feedback?

Gretchen S.B.: It was a little nerve wracking at first because as a creative person you always ... I don't know, maybe it's just me, think of worst case scenarios first. So in my mind, there were all these terrible things that were going to happen. And then it was nowhere near that.

James Blatch: I don't think it's just you. It's part of being a creative person. So let's start going through them. Should we start with the cover and the first thing people see about your book?

What did you think of Stuart's take on the cover?

Gretchen S.B.: I do agree that it is unrelentingly purple.

James Blatch: It was a little purple.

Gretchen S.B.: It's very purple. And once he pointed out the red in her face and neck, I couldn't unsee it.

So I've been talking to my cover artist about it and talking about moving the words and the title and everything because all that makes total sense.

I understand what he's saying about the background because she and I have had that discussion and so the third book in the series, the background is much more prominent. So yeah, I've already been talking to her about little changes we can make and it makes total sense to me once it's been pointed out.

James Blatch: Well that's the beauty of having an expert, isn't it? You couldn't see these things first time.

I thought it was interesting from Stuart and it was interesting also that he saw something else in the background that I saw and you saw this ... For me, it was recently there was a house there but Stuart a table which just goes to show that if you don't make it a distinct thing, it's just ... shouldn't probably be there.

Gretchen S.B.: It's just a table with candles on it.

James Blatch: Yeah, weirdly. And your cover artist was happy to take that direction from you?

Is this going to change your relationship with your cover artist or?

Gretchen S.B.: No. She's actually a local author who does cover art as well. And she and I go to events and stuff together so it would take something much more monumental to change that relationship.

James Blatch: Okay. And I can see and Stuart picked this up as well that you are very much in genre. And that was a key thing for him that was correct and right about the cover is that it's a very at a glance, obvious what genre it is. That's something that even if some of the detail is not as good as it could be, it was a big plus on your side. So you clearly look around at your competitors and work out how your book is going to make ... it's going to be stand out as being in genre.

Gretchen S.B.: Yeah. I can't take credit for that. The original cover I did myself and it was less than stellar and it wasn't entirely in genre. So I give

most of the credit to those covers to her because Tim Franklin looked at everything and then judged the covers based on that. So while I would like to take credit for being that on the ball, it was all her.

James Blatch: Okay. So that's the cover and some changes are in hand for that.

When do you plan to have the new cover up?

Gretchen S.B.: I am hoping for November or December once I finished the current books that I'm working on because I'm kind of concentrating on that.

James Blatch: Okay. So that'd be November, December, by the end of the year, maybe 2018.

So people who are listening to this podcast, they can go back and check what impact the comments that Stuart made.

Let's move on to the blurb. Now this was an interesting one because Bryan, for the third time in a row, really got his teeth into this blurb and I think he contacted you and wanted to know a little bit more about the story in some detail. And he wanted to change it probably more than other aspects of the feedback you got changed.

What did you think of what Bryan did?

Gretchen S.B.: I thought it was really, really cool. I was surprised when he said that he had to reach out to me more than average because I just figured it was par for the course.

Every time I told them something, they would then go, "Wait, wait, wait, explain that again." And I was just kind of like, "Oh, apparently I'm not doing a good enough job."

The highlight for me, and I know that it's silly but the highlight for me was when they accidentally used my name instead of Gwen's when you were

asking me questions and I noticed you commented on that and that just ... I was like, "Oh, this is fantastic."

James Blatch: The lady of the dead is semi-autobiographical.

Gretchen S.B.: No.

James Blatch: That would be a revelation.

So he went into the story, he looked for that tension, he looked for those moments that Bryan knows from his experience are what keep somebody reading through the blurb. And he says, "The longer they read through the blurb, the higher percentages chance that they're going to make a purchase of the book."

Are you happy with the blurb he's giving you? Is that going to replace wholesale what you had before?

Gretchen S.B.: Yeah, it is. It's clearly much better written. *Lady of the Dead* was my first book. So it was my first foray into all of it. So clearly that kind of stuff is not going to be very good.

When he said, "Change this change this. That opening line that actually sounds much better."

And mentioning in there that you do have the more adult scenes, putting that in the blurb because that's what people look for, that hadn't even occurred to me to do and once you pointed out I was like, "Oh yeah, You would want to put that in there." So yeah, definitely going to replace it.

James Blatch: It's a fundamental one and something that Bryan bats on about. In fact, I did an interview last week which will come out in the podcast in the near future about sweet romance with an author who writes books where there's no under the cover stuff, it's the door closes.

It's just as important for her to signal that in the blurb as it is for you to signal for your audience, this is what you're going to get. These are quick

decisions people are making about books to read. And if you're not going to be what they're looking for, they're going to move on. So you need to put your wares on the table I guess, it's what Bryan would say it.

I'm pleased that you took that positively.

Are going to look at that blurb and rewrite your other blurbs?

Gretchen S.B.: Probably.

James Blatch: Another thing on your list of things to do this year. Now finally, Jenny's, now what did you think of Jenny's feedback?

Gretchen S.B.: As soon as she said the dreaded info dump, I was sitting at my day job office and I just put my head in my hand and growled really loud. So thankfully, there was nobody else in the office at the time since it was lunch.

I was worried that was going to come up because like I said, it was the first one I ever published and so you just want to get everything out.

And so when she said that I was like no. I couldn't simply listen to the feedback. I've been working on ways to, in my mind, try and figure out how to fix it.

James Blatch: Okay. Well, that's great.

And do you know what? The fact that you've improved with your writing with your subsequent books is ... From this point of view, this exercise isn't neither here nor there, the important thing is that we got an opportunity to see some rookie type mistakes.

I'm making them as well in my writing and have somebody pick them up and explain how to avoid it. I know the fact that it's probably in everyone's first book is going to be not them at their best. Of course they get better, but it was good for this exercise.

I hope that you didn't take it too badly. But it's always tough to hear when someone picks out something especially if you know it's right.

Gretchen S.B.: It's one of those things where it's killing your darlings. It's one of those things where I'll finish the book I'm working on so that I'm a little bit removed from all of it and then I'll go back and I'll be like, "Okay. Where are we making the cuts on here."

I'll probably do it over Thanksgiving or Halloween or something like that just sit down.

James Blatch: Jenny is a story person and what you should take away from it is what she said is there are some great conceits in that first book, that first story, they leap out. The whole conceit of the lady of the dead is brilliant as is this relationship thing.

Where did that come from, this idea that if you don't act on the relationship, the person goes insane?

Gretchen S.B.: It came from the fact that when I wrote it, I was reading a lot of paranormal romance. and there were two things that popped out in all the books I read.

One, there had to be a reason for them to have adult content in the book and the men tended to be very pushy about it. And I was like, "Okay. Well, I don't like that. They're pushy about it. I need to give a different reason for it."

And so it occurred to me, "Hey, what if I give them a week that they have to do this." Then I was like, "Wait, then I have to write a week in a book." That feels a little long.

So then I straightened it because I hate myself and my characters and made it three days instead and figured best case scenario they win, worst case scenario we get an insane character.

James Blatch: It was great and Jenny was very taken with the idea and clearly you had some fundamentally good things in there for a series and for a book.

And Jenny of course, because she's an editor picked over some of the way it was laid out and some of the way was executed and unlike she does with me, gives you some homework to do.

Gretchen S.B.: Yes. That's the best kind of editor though.

James Blatch: Yes, it is. So whereabouts are you in your career? So say you've got a full time job so this is at the moment something you're doing as a part time thing, as a hobby, are you making any money from it at the moment Gretchen?

Gretchen S.B.: Not even remotely. I'm sure I'll get slammed down for saying this but I have a bit of an anti-success story.

I have 12 titles out, branching over four different series and I just wrapped up one of my trilogies. And I just keep putting money in, making all of the mistakes under the sun.

I'll have just started implementing stuff that I saw in actually the ads for authors' courses. So I just started building my mailing list even though I've been writing for five years. I'm starting from square one as of June.

James Blatch: Okay. Well, this came at the right time then.

You've got a few pointers in some other key areas to do with the product as well as the marketing advice you're going to get from Mark.

All we can do Gretchen is cross our fingers for you and hope that this is going to be a bit of a turnaround and we'd love to see you back on the podcast one day telling us in a little while that ... I don't know, who knows, maybe you quit your job.

Gretchen S.B.: That would be fantastic.

James Blatch: Thank you for being such a good sport Gretchen and for putting yourself forward for the book club. I'm pleased you got something out of it.

And as I say, we'll check back in with you at some point. We will do a round up. I think I can feel a podcast episode coming next year where we revisit everybody who's been in the book club so far and see what were the changes made because ultimately is no point in doing this if they don't have a positive impact on sales.

Gretchen S.B.: That would sound like fun.

James Blatch: Great. Thank you. Gretchen.

Gretchen S.B.: Thank you.

James Blatch: Gretchen took it on the chin. She got a good amount of praise, she got a lot right and then she got some good areas of feedback.

Her response to Jenny's was interesting, where she sort of growled when she heard it when she was at work but knew that that was the case. And as you said she was really guilty of it in those first books and she's written a lot of books since.

It feels to me like Gretchen has some work to do in terms of marketing. She's catching up a little bit late in the game too. She's taken your course but only just. A comment where she said in the interview 13, 14 books out and the exciting thing is that she's starting with product whereas most people don't start with product but she is sort of starting again now.

So she's come at the right time in terms of blurb, in terms of writing, in terms of cover and in terms of advertising help from yourself.

Do we think we can do an episode maybe in the New Year where we get back all our three book club people to find out how they got on this year?

Mark Dawson: Much better than I did.

James Blatch: Or we just never mentioned them again.

Mark Dawson: If their sales have gone down, we pray quietly into the background. But no, I don't think that will happen. So again, yeah, we could certainly do that.

James Blatch: We always talk about everything good and bad on this podcast honestly.

Mark Dawson: Almost everything.

James Blatch: Yes, almost everything. Okay that's it. So how do you get in the book club?

How do you get in the book club, Mark?

Mark Dawson: Well, you have to be a supporter on Patreon of the podcast. So you can go to patreon.com/SPF podcast and sign up for the gold level, which is \$3 a show so that'd be about \$10 /to \$12 a month and you get quite a lot of cool stuff actually. Are we still sending out pins?

James Blatch: Yeah. We send out pins and you get a chance-

Mark Dawson: That reminds me, I have to say this, I had ... I was in Wales last ... a week ago today actually as we're recording this when I was in an academy event and I was ... had just finished, it was about four o'clock, I was sitting down talking to Louise Ross, he sold tons of books.

Two Ross', a Dawson and a Hardy from Amazon, Darren Hardy from Amazon. And this this guy rushed into the room, it was just us there and him and he had a Mark Dawson pin on which was very flattering. I think hadn't come to the conference, he'd driven a BM4 just to see me and I was really touched.

Mark Dawson: He kind of came in, shook my hand and disappeared again. It was lovely. And so he had a pin, it looked very good, I had to explain to him what the hell it meant.

James Blatch: Do they want one?

Mark Dawson: It's a bit of a cult

James Blatch: What did you call yourself?

Mark Dawson: This is a family podcast James.

James Blatch: I should put a pin on here although I don't want to ruin that beautiful shirt.

Mark Dawson: Any more business on that shirt, my head might explode

James Blatch: It is quite a busy shirt but so they're busy team, they're busy losing almost every game at the moment.

Thank you for coming into the book laboratory with us for this week's episode. We are opening the doors for applications for the next book club for which we're going to do towards the end of this year.

So make sure you're a Patreon supporter, go to patreon.com/spfpodcast, choose the gold level and you will be in the hat for selection for the experts to pour over your assets.

Thank you very much indeed.

Mark Dawson: Experts to do what?

James Blatch: Pour over your assets.

Mark Dawson: Perfect.

James Blatch: That's it for this week will speak to you next week. Bye bye.

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